

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 958

By McNally

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of John Rice Irwin of Clinton.

WHEREAS, the members of this General Assembly were greatly saddened to learn of the passing of John Rice Irwin; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Irwin was a dedicated steward of Tennessee's rich history, a true gentleman and cultural historian whose foresight and invaluable contributions enriched the lives of so many and will continue to do so throughout the generations; and

WHEREAS, John Irwin founded the Museum of Appalachia in 1969; located in Clinton, the nonprofit, Smithsonian affiliate museum is a bastion of living history, a pioneer mountain farm-village that gives voice to the people of Southern Appalachia through the artifacts and stories they have left behind; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Irwin was born on December 11, 1930, in Union County; while he was still a toddler, his family was forced to move from their farm to make way for the flooding of Norris Lake and the construction of Norris Dam and ultimately resettled in the Bethel community; and

WHEREAS, the precocious boy from East Tennessee was captivated by his Appalachian heritage, sitting at the feet of his grandparents and listening intently to their stories of the past; noticing young John's fascination, his grandfather, Marcellus Moss "Sill" Rice, encouraged him to "keep the old-timey things that belonged to our people and start you a little museum sometime," a suggestion he took to heart; and

WHEREAS, after graduating from high school, John Irwin served in the United States Army and was stationed in Germany during the Korean War; following his discharge, he returned to his home of East Tennessee and utilized the G.I. Bill to continue his education; and

WHEREAS, he earned his bachelor's degree in history from Lincoln Memorial University, where he met the love of his life and future wife, Elizabeth McDaniel; the couple were blessed with two daughters, Karen and Elaine, and enjoyed fifty-three years of marriage, until Mrs. Irwin's passing in 2008; and

WHEREAS, after receiving his undergraduate history degree, John Irwin earned a master's degree in international law from the University of Tennessee; he thereafter taught in public schools and colleges for several years and became the youngest superintendent of schools in the State in 1962, when he was elected to the position in Anderson County at age thirty-one; and

WHEREAS, though dedicated to his career in education, Mr. Irwin never lost his passion for Appalachian history; he eventually bought a historic cabin, placed it on his family property in Norris, and then attempted to restore the cabin with fidelity to its original 1898 iteration; and

WHEREAS, before long, the Irwin family welcomed friends and visitors to their cabin and the unique collection of artifacts therein; upon his retirement in 1980, John Irwin embarked on a full-time effort to develop his burgeoning museum, which would eventually be composed of thirty-five log structures, including the cabin of the Mark Twain family and three large exhibit buildings that house tens of thousands of Appalachian artifacts; and

WHEREAS, in its inaugural year of 1969, the museum hosted approximately 600 visitors; today, it regularly sees tens of thousands of guests annually, having gained substantial national recognition in the 1980s, largely due to the promotion and praise of notable Tennesseans such as then-Governor Lamar Alexander and writer Alex Haley; and

WHEREAS, in 1989, Mr. Irwin won a coveted MacArthur Foundation fellowship, which he used to build the museum's Hall of Fame; for his preservation efforts, he was also recognized with honorary doctorates from Lincoln Memorial University, Carson-Newman University, and Tusculum University; and

WHEREAS, he operated the Museum of Appalachia until it was converted to a 501(c)3 organization in 2003; he served in an advisory role for the next decade, during which time the museum achieved recognition as a Smithsonian affiliate; and

WHEREAS, John Irwin was also an author of note, having published a number of books, including his most popular, *Alex Stewart: Portrait of a Pioneer*, and

WHEREAS, in addition to his teaching career and his life's work of establishing and shepherding the Museum of Appalachia, Mr. Irwin was wholly devoted to his family and always endeavored to remain true to family values of the highest order; and

WHEREAS, John Irwin is survived by his daughter, Elaine Irwin Meyer, and her husband, Edward William Meyer III; his brother, David, and his wife, Carolyn; and his three grandchildren, Maia Lindsey (Jason) Gallaher, John Rice Irwin (Sara) Meyer, and Edward William Meyer IV; and

WHEREAS, he is further survived by his five great-grandchildren, Rese, Avery, Meyer, Landry, and Parker, as well as a host of other relatives, including his niece, Anne Irwin Buhl, and grandniece, Katherine Buhl; and

WHEREAS, he was preceded in death by his parents, Glenn G. Irwin and Ruth Rice Irwin; wife, Elizabeth Ann McDaniel Irwin; daughter, Karen Ann Irwin Erickson; and nephew, Robert David Irwin; and

WHEREAS, John Irwin leaves behind an indelible legacy of integrity and probity in public life, compassion and loyalty in private life, and diligence and dedication in all his chosen endeavors; and

WHEREAS, Tennessee is most fortunate to have had such a devoted and enterprising historian as Mr. Irwin, and it is fitting that we pause to honor the legacy of this exceptional public servant and human being; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING, that we honor the memory of John Rice Irwin, reflecting fondly upon his life of service and his invaluable contributions to Tennessee through the preservation of Appalachian history and culture.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we express our sympathy and offer our condolences to the family of Mr. Irwin.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy and upon proper request made to the appropriate clerk, the language appearing immediately following the State seal appear without House or Senate designation.